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### Being 'Ismaili' and 'Muslim': Some Observations on the Politico-Religious Career of Aga Khan III

Soumen Mukherjee<sup>a</sup> Versions of this paper were presented at the universities of Edinburgh and Heidelberg. I wish to thank the audiences and especially Faisal Devji, Michel Boivin, Gita Dharampal-Frick, Margret Frenz, Suranjana Ganguly, Roger Jeffery, Anne Mossner, Francis Robinson, Dietmar Rothermund, Franziska Røy and the anonymous referees of *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* for their insightful comments.

<sup>a</sup> Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

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## Being 'Ismaili' and 'Muslim': Some Observations on the Politico-Religious Career of Aga Khan III

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### Abstract

This paper examines the role of politico-religious leaders of smaller sectarian and sub-sectarian Muslim sects in the broader politics of Muslim community consciousness in colonial South Asia. The case of Aga Khan III, the Imam of the Shiite sub-sect of the Khojas, provides our example. This complex process, whereby the Khoja sub-sect increasingly came to identify with the broader Muslim community in colonial South Asia—albeit preserving certain sub-sectarian particularities—is examined with reference to the paradigmatic model of 'path dependence'. The balance that Aga Khan III struck between the socio-religious and political worlds—hinging upon his dual role as a spiritual and a political leader—is deconstructed with the qualified employment of the analytical tool of 'strategic syncretism'. The paper shows how specific socio-religious sub-sectarian traits were effectively retained at the same time as an overarching political consensus forged links between different Muslim sectarian traditions.

**Keywords:** Colonial Bombay, community consciousness, political activism, leadership, Aga Khan III, Muslim sect, Shiite, Khoja

### Introduction

Academic works on the nature of Muslim religious nationalism in South Asia have been shaped to a great extent by the idea of a monolithic Muslim community, permeated by religious nationalist sentiment, *vis-à-vis* a majority

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Hindu population. However, this tends to obscure the many cleavages in the Muslim community along the lines of theological and sectarian differences, regional variations and the sheer range of historical possibilities thrown up by moments of negotiation on the question of representation.<sup>1</sup> This invites a problematisation of the very concept of 'identification'<sup>2</sup> as a key to understanding the mechanism of any form of consensus in society. Furthermore, a crucial problem in both state policy and secular academic discourse seems to be a division between the conceptual categories of 'secular nationalism' and 'religious communalism'.<sup>3</sup> Such divisions are misleading, not least because more often than not they tend to produce essentialised views of 'identities' where markers of community identity are unduly grouped into mutually-exclusive categories.

The Ismailis present a classic case in point. In South Asia, the term 'Ismaili' is used as an umbrella term for the Mustali Bohras and the Nizari Khojas, who constitute a minority Shiite group which shares some traits with South Asia's Hindus.<sup>4</sup> Alienated from the bulk of the Sunni Muslims for a large part of their

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<sup>1</sup> Notable early exceptions to this line of thought include M.T. Titus, *Islam in India and Pakistan: A Religious History of Islam in India and Pakistan* (Calcutta: YMCA Press, 1959), pp.87–115, 170–9, which underscores the sectarian differences and the ramifications of Islam's meeting with a non-Islamic environment in South Asia. Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1973), is an ambitious project to identify the specific 'Indian' elements of Islam in the subcontinent. The problems of 'representation' and 'consensus' are dealt with in Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). More recently, Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), has looked at the variables of individual, regional, class and cultural differences that went into forging an Islamic identity in South Asia.

<sup>2</sup> This, as distinct from discussions about 'identity', invokes the idea of a two-way *process* whereby 'groups, movements, institutions try to locate us ... construct us within symbolic boundaries' and in turn 'we try to manipulate or respond to it' so as to 'exist within that kind of symbolic framework'. See Stuart Hall, 'Politics of Identity', in Terence Ranger, Yunas Samad and Ossie Stuart (eds), *Culture, Identity and Politics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), pp.129–35, esp. p.130.

<sup>3</sup> Ayesha Jalal, 'Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia', in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds), *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.76–103. A further problem is the expression 'communalism', which refers to the apparent 'illegitimacy' of religious nationalism. See Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.8–9. It is because of the delegitimising aspect of the term 'communalism' that, taking my cue from Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), I prefer the expression 'religious nationalism' here.

<sup>4</sup> In matters of intestate succession they were governed by rules closer to Hindu laws than Sharia until 1937, when the Shariat Act came into effect. There is a plethora of literature on the history and culture of the Ismaili community. Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) offers a general history of the community down to modern times. Revisionist works such as Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis in Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Manohar/Centre de Sciences Humaines, 1997) bring out the 'threshold'/liminal nature of the



history on account of theological differences, the eventual accommodation of the Bohras and the Khojas within South Asia's Muslim religious nationalist tradition hinged decisively upon the instrumentality of their leadership and the changing rhetoric of socio-religious communication. This is, however, by no means to dismiss the nuanced history of competing versions of Islamic self-perceptions. These operated in an Anglo-Indian legal space which was experimenting with the standardisation of liminal social groups. Sections of the Khojas became vocal about this, especially in the late nineteenth century, as evidenced by the socio-religious debates that engaged contending factions in the period. The key questions, however, remain: which of these versions eventually came to predominate? And what was the particular context that allowed this? Part of the repositioning of the Aga Khani Khojas within the Muslim religious nationalist tradition required a studied silence from them regarding their social memory of not-so-pleasant past hostility and persecution.<sup>5</sup> On another plane, it involved two inter-related processes: first, development by Aga Khan III of a state of consciousness conducive to relating to the broader Muslim nationalist tradition in contemporaneous South Asia,<sup>6</sup> drawing upon his preference for one set of symbols over another; and secondly, the maintenance of certain socio-religious specificities of the Khoja sub-sect in a way that did not inhibit their participation in the political process in a period of intense political activity and standardisation. This requires a nuanced enquiry into the historical trajectory of shifting identities, and translation of visions into reality.

Aga Khan III (1877–1957) was not only the spiritual head of the Khojas with extensive temporal powers (an issue that did not go unchallenged for the larger part of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), but he was also one of the most prominent political personalities of late colonial South Asia. Indeed, what makes the Khoja case unique is the Khoja belief to this day in a living Imam (Hazir Imam), embodied in the person of the Aga Khan claiming direct descent

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Nizari Khojas. See also Dominique-Sila Khan and Zawahir Moir, 'Coexistence and Communalism: The Shrine of Pirana in Gujarat', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol.XXII, Special Issue (1999), pp.133–54; and more recently Dominique-Sila Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004). The bulk of this literature corrects scholarly works from the early twentieth century that attached much importance to Persian missionary activities (*dawa*) which had supposedly conditioned the development of the religio-cultural traits of the Nizari Khojas. Representative of such older scholarship is Wladimir Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujrat', in *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JBBRAS)*, Vol.XII (1936), pp.19–70. For the projection of the Khoja faith as an extension of Persian missionary activities, see Azim Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1978); and Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs*.

<sup>5</sup> See fn.13.

<sup>6</sup> 'Aga Khan' is the title of the Imams of the Nizari Khojas. Hasan Ali Shah (1804–1881), the 46th Imam of the Nizari Khojas was Aga Khan I; he was succeeded by Aga Ali Shah, Aga Khan II (1830–1885), and Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1877–1957) who succeeded to the Imamate in 1885 at age seven.





from the house of Ali. This is what distinguishes the Aga Khani Khojas from the bulk of the Muslim community, including the Twelver Shiites and the Mustali Bohras.<sup>7</sup> Investigating the career of Aga Khan III, therefore, involves engagement at two levels: the Aga Khan as the spiritual head of the Khojas; and the Aga Khan as a statesman who enabled the political integration of his followers into South Asia's Muslim *qaum* (nation). He succeeded in achieving the latter, moreover, without eroding his own position as leader of the Khojas. This paper seeks to deconstruct his politico-religious visions, and the mechanisms he resorted to in realising his visions, focusing especially on the 1900s and 1910s, probably the most crucial phase of this development. However, as we shall see below, a fuller understanding of the key moments in the politico-religious career of Aga Khan III necessitates an analysis of the broader historical context, and not least the group-internal dialogues of the nineteenth century, often left aside in otherwise masterly studies of the subject.<sup>8</sup>

### **Aga Khan III, the Khojas, and the Muslim *Qaum* of South Asia: Towards an Analytical Framework**

Studies of leadership in South Asia are often grouped into two essentially different schools, a so-called 'instrumentalist' school and a 'primordialist' school. Many of the religious nationalist movements thus came to be seen as reflections of either the manipulation of supposed symbols of identity by the society's elites (the 'instrumentalist' version), or as extensions of essential religio-cultural specificities that decisively distinguished one religious community from another (the 'primordialist' approach).<sup>9</sup> The present paper, however,

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<sup>7</sup> The Shiites are divided into different sections of whom the Twelver Shiites, with their belief in twelve Imams, constitute the majority. The Ismailis believe Ismail ibn Jafar was the successor to Jafar al Sadiq, thus deviating from the Twelver Shiites who regard Musa al Kazim as the rightful successor. The Ismailis are further sub-divided on the question of the rightful successor to the Imamate: those supporting al Mustali as the successor to al Mustansir Billah came to be regarded as the Mustalis (or Bohras in the subcontinent, further split into different sub-sections); the other group, who regard Nizar as the successor, and who believe in a living Imam, came to constitute the Nizaris (the Khojas of South Asia).

<sup>8</sup> See Teena Purohit, 'Identity Politics Revisited: Secular and "Dissonant" Islam in Colonial South Asia', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.45, no.3 (2011), pp.709–33 for an insightful analysis of the career of Aga Khan III with reference to the simultaneous development of what she calls 'the political project of secular Islam', characterising the Aga Khan's political activities, and the activation of religious motifs of messianic Islam as expressed through the *ginan* (Ismaili devotional literature from the subcontinent) tradition.

<sup>9</sup> Much of the debate about elite manipulation of South Asia's Hindus and Muslims is encapsulated in the Brass–Robinson debate. This gravitates around the question of elite agency, often *allegedly* going to the extent of circumventing contextuality, as upheld by Brass. See Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp.119–81; Paul Brass, 'Elite Groups, Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity Among the Muslims of South Asia', in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp (eds), *Political Identity in South Asia* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, 1979), pp.35–77; and Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), pp.69–118.





draws upon a scholarly tradition that has been crucial in wedding the 'cognitive' (internal) and 'contextual' (external) in studies of individuals and their thoughts and actions, assigning importance to both individual rationality and structures and context.<sup>10</sup> Thus the inter-related aspects of changing historical processes and the role of (politico-religious) leadership in such processes is given due importance. A study of the various rival Khoja factions' quest for selfhood, which characterised much of the community's history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provides the backdrop to this enquiry. The question of the instrumentality of Aga Khan III's leadership is studied through the analytical framework of 'strategic syncretism', albeit in a qualified way. This helps us to understand the religio-cultural bases, and also the employed idioms, of Aga Khan III's political activism.

'Strategic syncretism' as a concept was originally employed by Christophe Jaffrelot to study the emergence of Hindu nationalism, building upon Clifford Geertz's conceptualisation of 'ideology' as a 'symbolic strategy', the mechanism of establishing and defending patterns of values, norms and beliefs, and the upholding of specific religio-cultural traditions.<sup>11</sup> In Jaffrelot's formulation, nationalism figures as an ideology *par excellence* with emphasis on what he calls the 'manipulative reinterpretations of cultural material', while also keeping an eye on the 'cultural' aim of the interpreters. Hindu nationalist ideology thus appears as an invented tradition though, he adds, this could also be explained in terms of the sub-category of 'strategic syncretism'. 'Strategic syncretism' conceives of a situation where much of the constituent elements of an ideology appear to have been taken from the armoury of antagonistic groups (hence the idea of 'syncretism'); this syncretism is at the same time 'strategic' because it is aimed precisely at dominating those from whose armoury many of the

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Opposed to this is Francis Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim Separatism', in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp (eds), *Political Identity in South Asia* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, 1979), pp.78–112; and Francis Robinson, 'Nation Formation: The Brass Thesis and Muslim Separatism', in *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.156–76, where he emphasises the historical significance of socio-religious and cultural movements and the general politico-historical context. However Robinson is not very comfortable with the label 'primordialist' either, see *Islam and Muslim History*, p.13.

<sup>10</sup> While the 'instrumentalist' version has been ascribed most consistently to Paul Brass, the model developed in his *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* did not ignore the role of 'pre-existing cultural values or intergroup attitudes' in conditioning the ability of elites to manipulate symbols. See Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp.76–7. For a theoretical outline, see Quentin Skinner, 'Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action', in *Political Theory*, Vol.2, no.3 (1974), pp.289–301, which underlines the dynamic relationship between 'professed principles and actual practices of political life'.

<sup>11</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Hindu Nationalism: Strategic Syncretism in Ideology Building', in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, Vol.28, nos.12–13 (Mar. 1993), pp.517–24. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp.193–54.



constituent elements of that identity have been taken.<sup>12</sup> Of crucial importance here is the balance that 'strategic syncretism' strikes between the 'cognitive' and the 'contextual' worlds, i.e. the over-arching importance of the politico-historical context. This it does both in terms of the vocabularies with which the actors equip themselves and the eventual translation of thought into action; and the constraints that it imposes, the agency of the actors notwithstanding.

The different use of this concept here is that the underlying principle does not hinge upon the identification of any strict friend/enemy dichotomy, as in Jaffrelet's work. In contrast, this paper proceeds from an underlying assumption that tactics of 'strategic syncretism' are not necessarily tactics of disarming an 'enemy'; it could well be deployed as a cohesive force to bring together diverse sects/worldviews/schools of belief or thought into broader religious categories.

The historical delegitimisation of the Bohras and the Khojas by the Sunnis (the bulk of South Asia's Muslim population) found expression through a cold indifference towards them at best, or open hostility and systematic persecution at worst.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many of Aga Khan III's efforts to bring about consensus in the fragmented Muslim *qaum* were sensitive to these specific religious problems; at the same time he largely operated along political lines to oppose an evolving Hindu nationalism. The 'strategic' element in his conceptualisation of a Muslim *qaum* in South Asia thus involved negotiations leading to (re)locating the Khojas in a Muslim *weltanschauung*. It is important to note that the Aga Khan's claim to (political) leadership of the Muslims of South Asia depended on the success of the identification of the Khojas with the larger Muslim community. At the same time he had to defend his own spiritual claims to leadership of the Khojas. Selective employment of religio-cultural motifs, often symbolic, formed the basis of this political linkage.

This brings us to the heart of the problem, namely deconstructing Aga Khan III's politico-religious career in his capacity as the living Imam of the Khojas on the one hand, and as one of the key political personalities in South Asia's

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<sup>12</sup> Jaffrelet, 'Hindu Nationalism', p.517.

<sup>13</sup> For accounts of this animosity see the late-Mughal Persian text by Ali Muhammad Khan, *Mirat I Ahmadi*, in Syed Nawab Ali and C.N. Seddon, *Mirat I Ahmadi: Supplement* (Baroda: Gaikwad's Oriental Series, 1928), pp.109–10. E.I. Howard, defence counsel for the Aga Khan in the 1866 Great Khoja Case, pointed to the danger of persecution and the resultant outward conformity of the Khojas to Sunni custom (*takyia*). See E.I. Howard, *The Shia School of Islam and its Branches, Especially that of the Imamee-Ismaeilies. Being a Speech delivered by Edward Irving Howard, Esq., Barrister-at-Law, in the Bombay High Court in 1866* (Bombay: Oriental Press, 1866), pp.17–28, 61.



Muslim *qaum* on the other. Much of his career was shaped by earlier legal developments affecting the Bombay Khojas from the 1860s onwards. These began as essentially separate issues, probably with none of the far-reaching politico-religious import they later came to carry. Nevertheless it was this trajectory that set the scene for Aga Khan III's activities.

### The Rhetoric of Opposition

While this essay does not allow sufficient space to substantially elaborate the role of the colonial establishment, or of the individual law cases, we need to understand the bearing they had on the Aga Khan's position. By the time Aga Khan III took over the Imamate in 1885, he was well along a historical trajectory which social scientists call 'path dependence',<sup>14</sup> characterised in this instance by a long history of differing self-perceptions among the rival Khoja factions which had strong undercurrents of contending Islamic worldviews. This had its roots in developments in the 1820s, and especially in the events of the 1840s, that brought Aga Khan I and his household to India and his eventual settlement there as a political refugee. This brought Aga Khan I into close contact with his followers in western India, and resulted in attempts at tighter control over matters of property and tithes, to which the Bombay Khojas objected. It also made him subject to British legal authority. Hence the resistance in subsequent decades to the Aga Khan's efforts to assert his authority was played out in a public space created and conditioned by a British judicial system, and garbed in a language of 'public interest', a language that subtly distinguishes the developments of the 1850s and 1860s from those of the 1820s.

The Great Khoja Case of 1866 was the crucial law case that came up with probably the most precise definition of the Nizari Khoja until that time. The basic question in the case was whether the Khojas were Sunnis or Shiites; if they were Sunnis, as the self-styled 'reformers' claimed, there would be no need for a spiritual head at all. As noted above, the issues in the late 1820s had been confined to control of pecuniary resources and the extent of the *jamat's*

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<sup>14</sup> James Mahoney, 'Path Dependence in Historical Sociology', in *History and Society*, Vol.29, no.4 (2000), pp.510–11, summarises path-dependent analysis by pointing to its three characteristic features: first, the causal processes studied are particularly sensitive to 'events that take place in the early stages of an overall historical sequence'; secondly, these early events are essentially contingent; and thirdly, these contingent events are followed by 'relatively deterministic causal patterns'. Furthermore, once a historical sequence gathers its own 'inertia', it tends to influence the policy of individual actors/agents; that is to say, individual decisions/policies are conditioned by broader institutionalist frameworks.



powers.<sup>15</sup> Aga Khan I had tried to assert his authority over the Bombay Khojas to ensure a steady flow of tithes, which not unsurprisingly provoked stiff opposition from sections of the community.<sup>16</sup> By the 1860s, this opposition had evolved into a full-scale 'reformist' movement. At issue was the extent of the Aga Khan's power and his position, and differences over how modernisation should proceed, especially educational reform. The 'reformist' movement claimed Sunni identity for the Khojas; this was tantamount to challenging the Aga Khani brand of Shiism. It was therefore imperative for the reformers that the whole matter be presented as a matter of 'public interest' utilising the powerful rhetoric of 'modern civilisation' versus 'ancient barbarism'.<sup>17</sup>

The pro-Aga Khan coterie, in clinging to its version of Shiism, needed to invert this 'reformist' argument by showing how *its* brand of Shiism championed the cause of civilisation. Dedication to the public interest thus gave these competing groups, each claiming rival Muslim identities, a vocabulary of both protest and defence. In contrast to the 1847 Khoja and Memon Case, which centred on the succession of property and where Justice Perry had shown a clear preference for customary laws,<sup>18</sup> the 1866 case established a Shiite Muslim

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<sup>15</sup> A *jamat* is an institution of adult male Khojas from a locality which has its own bureaucratic structure and officials such as an accountant (*kamaria*) and treasurer (*mukhi*), usually hailing from the wealthiest sections of the community.

<sup>16</sup> See Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City, 1840–1885* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp.113–21. See also J.C. Masselos, 'The Khojas of Bombay: The Defining of Formal Membership Criteria During the Nineteenth Century', in Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification*, pp.8–10; Amrita Sodhan, *A Question of Community: Religious Groups and Colonial Law* (Calcutta: Samya, 2001), pp.45–116; and Teena Purohit, 'Formation and Genealogies of Ismaili Sectarianism in Nineteenth Century India', PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 2007, pp.27–57 [<http://www.proquest.com.ubproxy.ub.uni-heidelberg.de>, accessed 28 Sept. 2009].

<sup>17</sup> See Sodhan, *A Question of Community*, pp.3, 82–116. However, to what extent and how this changing rhetoric conditioned Aga Khan III's political and socio-religious ventures needs to be further explored. The reformist articles and letters were published in the *Bombay Times and Standard* and *The Times of India* mostly between May, 1861 and December, 1862. These articles and letters, with copious reference to notes from the *Deccan Herald* and *The Poona Observer*, were eventually compiled in a collection entitled *A Voice from India: Being an Appeal to the British Legislature, by Khojahs of Bombay, against the Usurped and Oppressive Domination of Hussain Hussanee, commonly called and known as Aga Khan, by a Native of Bombay, 1864*. This collection was later included in Karim Goolamali, *An Appeal to Mr. Ali Solomon Khan, Son of H.H. the Aga Khan* (Karachi: Khoja Reformers' Society, 1932). While there might well have been more than just an 'economic' angle to attitudes to religion and/or dissent, the paucity of sources clearly articulating the dissenting position of the 1820s (unlike the 1860s) leaves studies of the 1820s' dissent somewhat incomplete at the present. If anything, E.I. Howard, *The Shia School of Islam and its Branches*, p.60, points out that it was not until 1851 that the plaintiffs actually came to affirm their Sunni identity.

<sup>18</sup> For the Bohras and the Khojas, matters of intestate succession were governed by rules similar to Hindu laws until 1937. See *Hirbae v. Sonbae*, or the *Khojas and Memons' Case* (1847), in 'Cases Illustrative of Oriental Life and the Application of English Law to India, Decided in H.M. Supreme Court at Bombay by Sir Erskine Perry', p.110, reprinted in *The Indian Decision, (Old Series), Vol. IV* (Trichinopoly and Madras, 1912), p.707.



identity for the Khojas. The Aga Khan was deemed to be their spiritual head in clearer terms than ever before (although this did not preclude subsequent opposing claims). This needs to be seen in the light of what was a more general process of an evolution of colonial legal epistemology that marked a clear British preference for textual sources and reconstruction of a scriptural tradition rather than for customary sources. In the course of time this contributed to a certain 'new politics of Muslim identity in [the] twentieth century'.<sup>19</sup>

However in contrast to the 1866 case, developments in the 1870s and 1880s showed some efforts on the part of the colonial establishment to circumscribe the powers of the *jamat* and the Aga Khan.<sup>20</sup> It was not until the turn of the twentieth century that this stance was revoked, finally leaving Aga Khan III in an unprecedentedly solid position. This came in the judgement of a 1909 case in which one Haji Bibi, the widowed daughter of Jungi Shah (an uncle of Aga Khan III), claimed a share of the estate left by Aga Khan I, on the grounds that offerings made to the Aga Khan were not for his sole consumption but for the whole of the Aga Khan family. The plaintiff claimed that the Khojas were originally Ithna Ashariya Shiites, unlike in earlier cases where the plaintiffs had claimed to be Sunnis. The Aga Khani camp claimed Shiite Imami Ismaili affiliation. In what became the irrevocable position on the exact nature of the community as defined in legal terms, Justice Russell decided that the Khojas were, and had always been, Shiite Imami Ismailis. Furthermore, it was decided that offerings made to the Aga Khan were only for *his* personal use, thereby closing much of the debate about his exact position and giving him a veritable free hand over property matters.<sup>21</sup>

The (legal) liminality that had so worried the colonial establishment was, however, barely an issue for the contending Khoja factions. Throughout the 1860s, the question for them was that of a 'Sunni' Khoja-hood, championed by the reformists, as opposed to the Aga Khani attachment to Shiite Islam. But from the late 1870s onwards, there had been problems even within the Shiite

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<sup>19</sup> Michael R. Anderson, 'Islamic Law and the Colonial Encounter in British India', in David Arnold and Peter Robb (eds), *Institutions and Ideologies: A SOAS Reader* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993), pp.165–85.

<sup>20</sup> The standard strategy was to point to ambiguity in the composition of the *jamats* which allegedly made them tools of the Aga Khan. See 'Annexure to Bill to amend and define the law of Testamentary and Intestate Succession to Khojás', in India Office Records (IOR), Public & Judicial Department Records, 'The Khoja Succession Bill', 1884, L/PJ/6/131, File 1428. See also C. Gonne to His Highness the Aga Khan, 18 December 1878; and 'Bill for Regulating Succession and Inheritance among (Khojas) of Bombay', Home Department, Judicial Branch, March 1880, Proceedings 123–134 (A), National Archives of India (NAI).

<sup>21</sup> *Haji Bibi v. H.H. Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, the Aga Khan* (1909), 11 Bombay Law Reports (Bom. L.R.), p.409.





group, with rival factions espousing Ithna Ashariya Twelver versions of Shiite belief versus Sabtia Sevenser versions.<sup>22</sup> Therefore in the 1866 Great Khoja Case and in subsequent decades, the language of opposition of the factions to each other, to measures by the colonial government, and for the defence of each of the contending parties, was thoroughly rooted in competing Muslim worldviews. Thus, when the Melvill Commission<sup>23</sup> was constituted by the government in the 1870s to enquire into the Bombay Khojas' laws of inheritance, the Sunni faction argued that its very faith was in danger. As the Sunni petition stated, because the Khoja community 'profess themselves to be Musalmáns' who follow 'Muhammadan law of inheritance contained in the *Holy Korán* and *Hádís*', any new law that might overturn this would make the Khojas in effect 'infidels'.<sup>24</sup> A series of legal developments were thus crucial in redrawing the limits of Khoja-hood. The predicament for the Aga Khani version of Shiism (as opposed to the Ithna Ashariya or Sunni Khoja claims) was its own particularities (for example belief in a living Imam). No wonder that its relocation under the rubric of Muslim religious nationalism depended upon maintaining a careful balance at both the socio-religious and political levels.

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, from the 1870s onwards, the landscape of Ismaili Khoja socio-religious activism was gradually changing. This was reflected in the foundation of a series of Ithna Ashariya (Twelver) Khoja associations (*mehfels*) with a view to promoting the socio-religious interests of that community. One of the earliest associations engaged in the ostensibly innocuous activity of imparting 'Arabic and religious education to the Khoja children of the Asna [Ithna] Ashari community and to hold religious meetings' was the Mahfil-i-Asna Ashari, established in 1878 and maintained by the Ithna Ashariya Khoja merchant Ibrahim Hasham at his own expense. Almost all these associations—the Mahfil-i-Panjtan established in 1887, the Khoja Mahfil-i-Huasin (*sic*) established in 1888, and the Khoja Shia Asna Ashari Volunteer Corps established in 1919 (the last organisation was probably reflective of the general spirit of self-help groups of the time)—were founded with the active support of Ithna Ashariya landed proprietors and merchants with limited financial means, and with a limited scope of activities. Such activities primarily meant propagating Ithna Ashariya Khoja religious beliefs; in fact, for the ever-sceptical colonial establishment they were by and large religious associations 'of no importance'. Indeed, hardly any of them ever engaged in any political activities; the chief exception in a limited sense was the Khoja Shia Asna Ashari Volunteer Corps, composed of Ithna Ashariya Khoja youths charged to 'keep order at political meetings and processions'. See 'List of Political, Quasi-Political & Religious Societies, Sabhas, Anjumans & Labour Unions in the Bombay Presidency & Sind for the year ending June 1920', Home Department, (Special), File 355 (74)-II/1921, pp. 15–7, Maharashtra State Archives (MSA).

<sup>23</sup> With Justice Maxwell Melvill as president, the Commission was encharged to ascertain the views of the Bombay Khojas with regard to the viability of placing them under the umbrella of the Hindu Wills Act (XXI of 1870). It originally had four members, representing the different strands within the Khoja community. Later two more members were admitted at the suggestion of the Aga Khan. Four of these members represented the Shiite division of the Khojas, while one came from the Sunni branch. See 'Bill for Regulating Succession and Inheritance among (Khojas) of Bombay'. See also 'The Khoja Succession Bill', 1884.

<sup>24</sup> Petition of Abdullah Haji Alarukhia and twelve other Sunni Khojas, IOR, Public & Judicial Department Records, 'Papers Relating to the Khoja Succession Bill', 1886, L/PJ/6/169, File 235.



### The Idioms of Identification

The distinctiveness of Aga Khan III lay in his effective negotiation of an Islamic identity sensitive to the norms of both the broader Islamic *qaum* and his own sub-sect. This involved, on the one hand, a political activism that could merge two worldviews and champion issues of modernisation, particularly with regard to education; on the other hand, it necessitated striking a balance that would effectively wed certain sectarian specificities to a general Islamic religio-cultural ethos, leading to a political identification. Indeed, as one commentator observes, when ‘Islamic groups’—and as is evident from the present study, spiritual and/or political leaders of such groups—enter the public sphere by carving out an ‘Islamic sphere of their own’, they do so ‘implicitly understanding’ that their activism relates to ‘concerns of wider interests that go beyond the parameters of the groups’ existence’.<sup>25</sup> In the course of engagement with issues dominating the common social space of the Muslim *qaum*, such activism might develop two different, but related, characters: ‘Islamic activism’; and ‘Islamist enterprise’. ‘Islamic activism’ is ‘an active public involvement beyond private or personal contemplation, which is not necessarily political in nature’, whereas ‘Islamist enterprise’ has essentially political underpinnings, focusing on the political role of Islam in society.<sup>26</sup> Tensions arise when activists champion a brand of Islamic activism drawing upon specific symbols with latent political import, but end up invoking secular political forces to defend a religiously-informed world order. Such tensions often reify the ambivalent societal location of their architects, as was the case with Aga Khan III thanks to his dual role as a ‘Muslim’ politician and a sectarian spiritual leader perceived to be theologically at odds with both Sunni and Shiite worldviews.<sup>27</sup> Thus by November 1918, in addition to his involvement in high-profile ventures such as the Khilafat Movement, Aga Khan III had come up with a Memorial exhorting the British Empire, as ‘the greatest Muslim power in the world’, to ‘protect Islam in Central Asia’.<sup>28</sup> The date is crucial, because it was also the year in which he published his *India in*

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<sup>25</sup> Dietrich Reetz, *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India, 1900–1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3–6.

<sup>27</sup> It can be further suggested that even ‘Islamist enterprises’, in their embryonic stage, might be something very different. Thus the trajectory of Abul Ala Maududi’s essentially Islamist enterprise shows that the ‘Islamist’ dimension was preceded by a more general engagement with the political world, not necessarily religiously underpinned. As has been noted, his involvement in the Khilafat Movement was ‘premised not on religion, but on history’. See Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.20.

<sup>28</sup> See IOR, Political & Secret Department Records, ‘Memorandum by H.H. the Aga Khan: Suggestion that the Policy of Great Britain should be to Protect Islam in Central Asia’, 1918/L/PS/11/141, Subject P 5169/1918.





*Transition: A Study in Political Evolution*, which he claimed was a 'detailed exposition' of his 'thoughts on India' and his 'hopes and aspirations for the future'.<sup>29</sup> His book focused on a range of issues that can be broadly grouped under the theme of 'development': from the federal experiment at different levels, through commerce, finance and agriculture, to education, health and community development. Interestingly, his book also elaborated certain conceptual categories that he had implemented through his social welfarist and political endeavours, bearing significant import. Aga Khan III's socio-political philosophy and political activism was defined by his underlying philosophy of a 'spiritual and cultural Pan-Islamism' sensitive to the diverse problems affecting the Muslim *umma* (community) worldwide. He thought 'political Pan-Islamism' had rather shallow roots, whereas 'spiritual and cultural Pan-Islamism', with its theory of 'spiritual brotherhood and unity of the children of the Prophet', was a central element of a much older 'Perso-Arabian culture'.<sup>30</sup> A discourse of civilisational taxonomy, drawing upon cultural and religious forces, undergirded this whole schema. Studied under the general rubric of 'social organisation', he equated Perso-Arabian civilisation with the 'Islamic' tradition, while other traditions were classified as Western (as opposed to 'Christian', probably due to his unquestioned belief in the 'Renaissance' and the 'Enlightenment'), Buddhist, or Brahmin.<sup>31</sup> It was, however, to this 'Western' secular framework that he ultimately turned for help in upholding Islam's religio-cultural order.

While Aga Khan III's pan-Islamic concerns were conceptualised along spiritual and cultural lines, though not without political ramifications, the accommodation of the Khojas in the broader Muslim political entity in South Asia operated on at least three different but intertwined levels: firstly, on the level of social (chiefly educational) reform, with Aga Khan III's involvement in the affairs of the Muslim Educational Conference and the Aligarh Movement; secondly, on the political level, where nascent Muslim nationalist politics took shape in the foundation of the All India Muslim League; and thirdly, by way of his taking up more specific politico-religious issues that concerned the majority Sunnis in the post-World War I era (for example the Khilafat question).

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<sup>29</sup> H.H. The Aga Khan, *India in Transition: A Study in Political Evolution* (Bombay and Calcutta: Bennett, Coleman and Co. Ltd., The Times of India Offices, 1918), pp.vii–x.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.156–8. Michel Boivin, 'The Reform of Islam in Ismaili Shīism from 1885 to 1957', in F. Delvoye (ed.), *Confluence of Cultures: French Contributions to Indo-Persian Studies* (Delhi: Manohar, 1994), pp.120–39, points to a certain harmonisation of Iranian and Indian traditions under Aga Khan III leading to the formation of a third category, or what Boivin calls 'neo-Isma'ilism', marked by a redefinition of the essential principles of Islam, with emphasis on spiritual pan-Islamism with strong ethical underpinnings.

<sup>31</sup> The Aga Khan, *India in Transition*, pp.1–14.



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The third, in particular, was a direct act of syncretism. Certain religio-cultural elements of the majority Sunni group were employed by him in strategically repositioning the 'heterodox' Khojas inside the supra-sectarian Sunni framework. This was very much a group-internal strategic syncretism, a tactic that involved identifying the Khojas with broader Muslim interests, which among other factors was both responsible for, and an effect of, the Aga Khan's rise to the ranks of South Asia's Muslim leadership.

Yet the question of who should represent India's Muslims never went uncontested. Take for instance the case of the Muslim Deputation of October 1906 to Lord Minto at his Simla residence, led by Aga Khan III. This was an event of great significance in the history of the campaign for separate electorates for Muslims, and indeed for the political culture of the soon-to-be-established All India Muslim League.<sup>32</sup> Criticism of the Simla Deputation came from none other than Muhammad Ali Jinnah, then very much in agreement with the moderate Congress position that the Congress Party was able to represent both Hindus and Muslims. Jinnah's critique was twofold. What was the object of the Deputation, and to what extent was the Deputation 'representative' of all Muslim interests?<sup>33</sup> There had already been opposition to the foundation of an exclusively Muslim political association from a section of the Muslim leadership. An organisation such as this, it was thought, might dismantle the structure of local associations, or challenge the Aligarh leadership. Furthermore, Aga Khan III himself suggested that the Simla Deputation be turned into a permanent committee (as opposed to any direct popular movement).<sup>34</sup> However once established, the All India Muslim League

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<sup>32</sup> The importance of this event has been emphasised by many commentators, politicians and historians. Aga Khan III, the leader of the deputation, himself noted it as 'the starting point of the recognition of the principle that the important Muslim minority in this country should have fair and legitimate share in the administration of the country'. Inaugural Address of the Aga Khan, Third Session of the All India Muslim League, Delhi, 29–30 January, 1910; see Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada (ed.), *Foundations of Pakistan: All India Muslim League Documents, 1906–1947: Volume I, 1906–1924* (Karachi and Dacca: National Publishing House Limited, 1969), p.94. David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, rev. ed., 1996), p.337, however, argues that the deputation was essentially an act of the 'Aligarh elders' and the Aga Khan was nothing more than a titular leader. The crux, nevertheless, lay in the elders' choice of the Aga Khan as the leader, which at once promoted him to the much-aspired-to position of leadership of South Asia's Muslims (though obviously not uncontested) *vis-à-vis* the Congress claims of representing Muslims.

<sup>33</sup> This came in the form a letter published in the *Gujarati* (Bombay, 7 October 1906). See Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada (ed.), *The Collected Works of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Vol. I, 1906–1921* (Karachi: East and West Publishing Company, 1984), p.1.

<sup>34</sup> This was conditioned, at least partly, by his not-so-smooth relations with Nawab Salimullah. Matiur Rahman, *From Consultation to Confrontation: A Study of the Muslim League in British Indian Politics, 1906–1912* (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1970), pp.28–30, suggests a much nuanced power-struggle between Aga Khan III and Nawab Salimullah. The All India Muslim League was nevertheless established, thanks to

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proved to be a sufficiently broad forum to accommodate the Aga Khan and other non-mainstream Shiite and Sunni personalities such as Adamjee Peerbhoy.<sup>35</sup> The Aga Khan was furthermore able to entrench his position as a political leader in a remarkably short time, thanks partly to his championing of the Aligarh Movement. The creation of a yawning gulf between the All India Muslim League and the Aligarh establishment was thus averted.

The question of social reform, however, has a longer history. 'Social reforms' (taken to mean mostly educational reforms)<sup>36</sup> had been the dominant rhetorical trope since the 1830s, giving the reformists a language in which to voice disputes over *jamat* rights. Education gradually emerged as the great platform on which issues ranging from backwardness, to (social) progress, to community consciousness, could be settled. One key new institution was an association called the (Bombay) Anjuman-i-Islam, established with the support of men like the Konkani merchant baron Muhammad Ali Roghay, and the Sulaimani Bohra nationalist politician Sir Badruddin Tyabji.<sup>37</sup> However from the very start the Bombay Anjuman struggled to convince the city's Muslims of its objectives.<sup>38</sup> The Anjuman's school, with its preference for Urdu as opposed to Gujarati, sought to bind the Muslims of western India to the general *qaum* in the subcontinent.<sup>39</sup> It was this increasing shift in linguistic focus that

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the concatenation of different forces: that of Hindu nationalism, the ostensible failure of the Simla Deputation, and above all the role of Syed Ameer Ali, Salimullah, and Mohsin-ul-Mulk among others. *Ibid.*, pp.32–4. And it was only in 1909 that the All India Muslim League and the Muslim Educational Conference were separated. See Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, p.339.

<sup>35</sup> A Daudi Bohra merchant baron and philanthropist from Bombay, Adamjee Peerbhoy was one of the pioneers championing a common Bohra cause from the 1870s, and gradually taking up broader Muslim issues, becoming the president of the first session of the All India Muslim League in 1907. See Soumen Mukherjee, 'Community Consciousness, Development, Leadership: The Experience of Two Muslim groups in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century South Asia', Doctoral Dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 2010, Chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup> Kassumbhai Nathubhai, Muhammad Dama and several other rich Khojas of Bombay established a school for Khoja children as early as the 1830s. Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India*, p.115.

<sup>37</sup> The (Bombay) Anjuman-i-Islam, formed to cater to Muslim interests and appealing to broader ideological concerns, was one of several Anjumans operating around the time; others were the Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam, Lahore, and the Anjuman-i-Islamia, Amritsar. See Abdul Rashid Khan, *The All India Muslim Educational Conference: Its Contribution to the Cultural Development of the Indian Muslims, 1866–1947* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.60.

<sup>38</sup> Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India*, pp.232–6.

<sup>39</sup> This was in sharp contrast to earlier trends when the role of Gujarati as a language that bound the various 'Gujarati-speaking trading classes' together despite internal conflicts and differences, chiefly religious, used to be invoked, most prominently in moments of crisis. Thus in the early 1830s, during protests against a municipal decision to slaughter stray dogs which would hurt Parsi religious sentiments, the Parsis were joined by Hindus, Jains, and Muslims (particularly Ismaili Muslims), showing the power of the Gujarati-speaking coterie. Jesse S. Palsetia, 'Mad Dogs and Parsis: The Bombay Dog Riots of 1832', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, Vol.11, no.1 (2001), pp.18–19.



characterised much of the post-1870s Muslim campaign for educational reform embodied most notably in the Aligarh Movement.

The Muslim University campaign was an enterprise that led further to the crystallisation of a specific cultural definition, while carving out an all-India Muslim constituency at the same time.<sup>40</sup> This had never been an easy development. Evidence shows that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's death in 1898 was followed by factional squabbles; and thanks to an embezzlement scandal in 1895, the situation at the Mahomedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College—the kernel of the future University—was far from promising.<sup>41</sup> Yet what characterised this campaign was a degree of consciousness of belonging to a common 'Muslim' cause which resulted in a qualified consensus on the part even of those who had been Sir Sayyid's arch political rivals.<sup>42</sup> While the greatest chunk of financial contributions came from the Nawab of Rampur, Aga Khan III's exhortations to promote education among India's Muslims resulted in the leaders of the smaller Shiite sub-sects emerging as the champions of this grand enterprise of propagating 'Muslim education'; it was they who bailed out the project from the quagmire of scandal, financial distress, and factional squabbling.<sup>43</sup> These contributions were all the more crucial considering that the Aligarh Movement had not found uncritical acceptance among all Shiites. Thus in Amroha, public debates questioned the Aligarh Movement's Sunni-oriented reformist project, leading to the establishment of organisations designed to undermine the Aligarh reformist agenda. They financially supported Shiite students and promoted parallel Shiite institutions of modern vocational education.<sup>44</sup>

The great tactical achievement of the Aga Khan therefore lay in his averting a socio-religious controversy with potential political ramifications that could have isolated his followers from the bulk of the Sunni *qaum*. Key to his composite Islamic worldview was his own nuanced understanding of Islam.

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<sup>40</sup> Gail Minault and David Lelyveld, 'The Campaign for a Muslim University, 1898–1920', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.8, no.2 (1974), pp.145–89.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.146–8.

<sup>42</sup> Part of the urgency was directly connected to genuine concerns to uplift the social conditions of a *qaum* seriously discredited by critiques in government circles of alleged backwardness. This is largely attributed to W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., [1871], 2004), though Hunter himself was quite categorical about the limited nature of his sources which he derived from Bengal. *Ibid.*, p.149. Curiously, however, this was subsequently applied in the pan-Indian context to explain 'Muslim separatism'.

<sup>43</sup> For example in 1906 Peerbhoy donated Rs110,000 for the establishment of a science college at Aligarh. See Pirzada (ed.), *Foundations of Pakistan*, Vol. I, p.16.

<sup>44</sup> Justin Jones, 'The Local Experience of Reformist Islam in a "Muslim" Town in Colonial India: The Case of Amroha', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.43, no.4 (2009), pp.889–96.



Indeed, as he noted much later in his *Memoirs*, 'Ismailism has survived because it has always been fluid', so much so that 'even the set of regulations known as the Holy Laws are directions as to method and procedure and not detailed orders about results to be obtained'.<sup>45</sup> In such a system, the role of the Imam in both the divine and temporal spheres came to be highlighted, with a well-established and highly-flexible administrative structure to sustain denominational specificities. Yet this administrative structure had a varied legacy. Depending on the immediate socio-political environment, it could take the form of highly-organised *jamat* council systems as in the Indian subcontinent or East Africa, or the very different hereditary familial tradition of *pirs* loyal to the Aga Khan as in Afghanistan and Central Asia (which ensured the regular flow of tithes).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore there had been important cleavages insofar as religio-social practices were concerned, perpetuating a distinctive Aga Khani Khoja social identity. Thus while 'professional dealings' with others were considered permissible, the Aga Khanis were categorically instructed not to enter into any social relations (for example marriages or sharing meals) with Ithna Ashariyas, not to constitute as a place of worship anything other than the *jamatkhana*, and not to bury their dead in the burial grounds of other sub-sects, in contrast to nineteenth-century practices.<sup>47</sup>

Special care was, however, taken to fine-tune these group-specific particularities, bringing them into consonance with the overarching cultural and spiritual values of Islam. Thus:

The example of the Prophet and of Abu Bakr and Omar and Ali should convince these pious people that the first duty of a Moslem is to give his time to the service of nation and not merely to silent prayers.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1954), p.185.

<sup>46</sup> For discussions about the structural organisation and functioning of *jamats*, see Sodhan, *A Question of Community*, pp.73–4. H.S. Morris, 'The Divine Kingship of the Aga Khan: A Study of Theocracy in East Africa', in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol.14, no.4 (1958), pp.454–72 examines why such a council system developed in India and East Africa as opposed to anywhere else. For accounts on how the *pirs* worked in the high mountains and valleys around Chitral, Afghanistan and Central Asia, see details of the Forsyth mission (late 1860s) in A.S. Picklay, *History of the Ismailis* (Bombay: Published by the author, 1940), pp.64–8; and Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, pp.184–6.

<sup>47</sup> *The Khoja Shia Imami Ismaili Council, Poona: Rules and Regulations* (Poona: The Khoja Shia Imami Ismaili Council, 1913), pp.39–41, 43.

<sup>48</sup> See Aga Khan III, 'Presidential Address to the All India Muslim Educational Conference', Delhi, 1902, in K.K. Aziz (ed.), *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Volume I, 1902–1927* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International), p.210.



According to him this was important, not least because the time and money spent on such prayers and pilgrimages, or celebrations of martyrs, had more often than not frayed the fraternal bonds of the *umma*, exposing it to sectarianism. As well, his choice of these particular historical figures is telling in at least two respects. Firstly, the general rhetoric of his Islamic activism is symptomatic of a gradual shift from 'other-worldly' to 'this-worldly' piety, emphasising the importance of self-affirmation and the development of self-consciousness in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islam in South Asia.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, the invocation of some of the heroes of the Sunni faith (otherwise seen as villains in Shiite belief) on a par with Ali is a classically conscious syncretistic act.

The same spirit of self-affirmation and a deep-rooted concern for the preservation of Muslim values was the guiding force of the education campaign. Aga Khan III noted in his 'Reply to the Address from the Trustees of the MAO College' in January 1910 that 'Aligarh should not only turn out learned and capable men but good Musalmans' who should not hesitate to imbibe the European spirit of self-sacrifice.<sup>50</sup> He also emphasised Muslim political consciousness, particularly in his campaign for separate electorates for Muslims, finally granted in the 1909 Morley-Minto Reforms. The idioms he used in this campaign are particularly interesting because, above all, they once again marked his efforts to connect his 'heterodox' sub-sect with Muslim India's polemic against the Hindu majority. According to him, the differences between Hindus and Muslims were not only 'religious', but also 'historical and physical, and in the latter respect, at least, [the differences] soon became marked, even in the case of recent converts to the Moslem faith'.<sup>51</sup> This reference to recent converts was not just an innocuous passing comment on the homogeneity of the Muslims of South Asia; it was a crucial sub-text to his political strategy that sought to place his followers, many of whom had been converted only a few centuries back, on a par with the bulk of the (supposedly much older) Muslim population.

Central to Aga Khan III's policy of campaigning for the cause of Islam was his exhortation to take up issues concerning non-Shiites, together with his keenness

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<sup>49</sup> See Francis Robinson, 'Religious Change and the Self in Muslim South Asia since 1800', in *Islam and Muslim History*, pp.104–21; and Francis Robinson, 'Other-Worldly and This-Worldly Islam and Islamic Revival: A Memorial Lecture for Wilfred Cantwell Smith', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, Vol.14, no.1 (2004), pp.47–58.

<sup>50</sup> This 'Reply' came out in *The Times of India* (Bombay, 27 Jan. 1910). See Aziz (ed.), *Aga Khan III, Volume I*, pp.325–7.

<sup>51</sup> See his interview with *The Times* (14 Feb. 1909), cited in Aziz (ed.), *Aga Khan III, Volume I*, pp.288–93.





to establish an image of Muslim loyalty to the British. Underlying this was his view of the Western-inspired liberal philosophy of the separation of the 'sacred' and the 'secular', reflected in his speeches enjoining his followers to abide by the laws of the state irrespective of who had made them.<sup>52</sup> This element of loyalty to Britain in the Aga Khan's thoughts is too well known to require further elaboration here. Interestingly, however, his policy of loyalty often hinged on the rhetoric of a friend/enemy binary, revolving around the question of religion. In a speech at a meeting of the Indian Volunteers Committee (of which M.K. Gandhi was chairman) in London on 1 October 1914, the Aga Khan connected the question of Muslim loyalty to Britain to broader Muslim aspirations, labelling Germany as 'the most dangerous enemy of Turkey and other Moslem countries'.<sup>53</sup> A further, and perhaps more complicated, moment of reckoning was provided by British policy towards Turkey and Indian defence of the Khilafat.<sup>54</sup> The ensuing Khilafat Movement—evoking as much the question of leadership as a study of a politico-cultural background that was characterised by a systematic use of 'Islamic symbols' to rally a following for India's nationalist cause—has been studied at length.<sup>55</sup> However, what is important is that two Shiite politicians—one the spiritual head of a 'heretic' sub-sect—should emerge as two prominent champions of the cause.

## Conclusion

For Aga Khan III, the effort to formulate a 'Muslim' identity that cut across sectarian divisions lay in negotiating on different planes. Riding high on a wave of victories in the law courts in 1909 that finally entrenched his religious position among his Khoja followers, what he succeeded in evolving was essentially a formula of balance and compromise. The present paper has tried to deconstruct the socio-religious and political aspects of his career. The balance he achieved lay in his underlying appreciation of the cleavage in the Muslim socio-religious world as opposed to in the political, yet often the former served the ends of the latter. His reconciliation formula was a conscious negation of any direct involvement in politics that might be at odds with the

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, p.187.

<sup>53</sup> See *The Times* (2 Oct. 1914), p.9.

<sup>54</sup> In 1916, he suggested in a confidential note the need to 'knock out' Turkey, citing the unholy hobnobbing of the ruling Turkish elite with the Germans that allegedly hurt Muslim sentiment. Drawing a line between this 'modern' Turkish ruling group and general Muslim interests, he advocated overthrowing the Turkish government and opting for a separate peace with Turkey. IOR, Political & Secret Department Records, 'The War: Importance of "Knocking Out" Turkey: Views of the Aga Khan', 1916, L/PS/11/111, Register No. P 4306/1916.

<sup>55</sup> The classic study of the Khilafat Movement is Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).



political order of the day; instead he consciously selected and strategically employed crucial symbols as potential binding forces (for example the Khilafat), or issues of general concern (for instance all-round progress and development, focusing on the question of representation). As well, he astutely remained silent on issues which could potentially hinder the integration of his sub-sect into the greater Muslim *qaum*. Above all, he made a conscious effort to maintain the socio-religious specificities of his sub-sect while simultaneously ensuring that they did not hinder any politically-expedient reconciliation with other Muslims.

His reconciliation formula was, however, not free of ambiguity. An engagement with the world of contemporaneous confidential British government knowledge engenders scepticism about both his personality, and his effectiveness as a spiritual and a political leader who could balance these two roles.<sup>56</sup> Nor was his loyalty to the Raj above question.<sup>57</sup> But in contrast to this world of intelligence

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<sup>56</sup> For example, scepticism about the Aga Khan's claims to Muslim leadership is testified to by a confidential note which warns that the Aga Khan, being the 'heretic of heretics' according to the majority of Muslims, should be checked in his interactions with both the Sultan of Zanzibar and Prince Faisal of the Hijaz, one of the key provinces of Ottoman Turkey which rebelled against Turkish suzerainty during the World War I at the instigation of the British. See J.A.W. to Seton, 24 January 1919, IOR, Political and Secret Department Records, 'Confidential Note on the Subject of Aga Khan', 1919, L/PS/11/147 Subject P.541. Later correspondence on the subject of the recommendation of the Aga Khan for the Nobel Peace Prize sheds further light on influential government views, bordering on scorn at times. The Aga Khan figures as a political opportunist, dangerously cut off from his own Muslim fraternity, seriously ridiculed by different groups. IOR, Political and Secret Department Records, 'Papers Relating to the Recommendation of the Aga Khan for the Nobel Peace Prize, 1924', 1924, L/PS/10/588, File 748/1916, Pt. 1-date: 1915-1925. Thanks to the Aga Khan's Persian background and warm relations with the Iranian ruling elites in general, Prince Samad Khan of Iran, a member of the International Court of Arbitration at The Hague, submitted a statement of nomination in favour of the Aga Khan—supported by a resolution of the Upper Chamber of the Indian Legislature—before the Nobel Committee in 1924 for his contributions to world peace. The 'motivation' emphasised his contributions as an 'Asiatic' to the new process of transition that was supposedly redefining relations between the West and the Asiatic world that were reflected in the post-war peace efforts, and above all in 'loyalty to the Empire'. See 'Memorandum on the Services of H.H. the Aga Khan to the Cause of International Peace', in 'Papers related to the Nomination of Aga Khan III, Year 1924, No. 2-1', The Norwegian Nobel Institute (NNI). The Government of India was discreet enough to distance itself from the nomination, stressing that it came from members of a Legislative Chamber, 'each of them individually qualified to propose a candidate . . . not a matter in which the Government of India could take part'. Letter of J.P. Thompson, Sec. to Gov't. of India in Foreign and Political Dept. to Sec. of the Nobel Committee (11 April 1924), in 'Papers related to the Nomination of Aga Khan III, Year 1924, No. 2-1', NNI.

<sup>57</sup> A disquieting moment came in World War II, apparently vindicating much of the earlier British scepticism. In 1940 the Nazi functionary from Sudetenland, Prince Max Hohenlohe, noted that the Aga Khan had offered his organisational services—drawing upon his followers and his several maharaja friends—in the event that Hitler's Third Reich decided to take over India. See 'Prinz Hohenlohe an Vortragenden Legationsrat Hewel' (25 July 1940), in *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik, 1918-1945: Aus dem Archiv des Deutschen Auswärtigen Amts, Serie D: 1937-1945, Band X* (Frankfurt/Main: P. Keppler Verlag KG, 1963), p.242 (Document No. 228). Whether this was just a ploy to safeguard South Asia's Muslim interests in general and that of his Ismaili followers in particular in the event of a German takeover, or if he was indeed



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reports and so on, influential sections of the international press were often greatly impressed by his charisma, an aspect of his image that he also carefully inculcated among his followers.<sup>58</sup>

And it is this carefully-preserved balanced formula, with its emphasis on a range of issues of general social concern, that formed the backdrop to the ambitious development projects of his successor, Prince (also Shah) Karim Aga Khan IV. What Shah Karim inherited and emulated is the legacy of one specific aspect of his predecessor's career, viz. a strong commitment to social welfarist endeavours—consolidated under him with the foundation of the Aga Khan Development Network in the 1960s—with a particular version of Islam gravitating around the Living Imam as the guiding force, while shunning the 'political' to a significant extent.

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entrenched in Nazi counsel, calls for further exploration, though that takes us beyond the scope of the present essay.

<sup>58</sup> Thus *The Washington Post* (4 Nov. 1914), p.8 [<http://www.proquest.com.ubproxy.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/>, accessed 1 Oct. 2009] described him as the 'spiritual head of the Mohammedans in India, East Africa, and Central Asia', while the columnist F. Cunliffe-Owen, in a serious misunderstanding of Islamic history and culture, actually went on to declare how the 'whole Moslem world' regarded the Aga Khan as the direct descendant of the Prophet and, even more preposterously, the possibility of the Aga Khan becoming 'Caliph'. See *The New York Times* (8 July 1923), p.XX5 [<http://www.proquest.com.ubproxy.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/>, accessed 1 Oct. 2009]. Later journalistic works, for example Naoroji M. Dumasia, *The Aga Khan and His Ancestors* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1939) and Harry J. Greenwall, *His Highness the Aga Khan: Imam of the Ismailis* (London: Gresset Pr., 1952) also eulogise the Aga Khan's person and position to an astonishing degree.

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